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THOROUGHFARES

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON





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THOROUGHFARES

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DAILY BREAD (1910)

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BORDERLANDS (1914)

THOROUGHFARES

BY
WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

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1914
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LONDON
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M CM XIV

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TO
EDWARD MARSH

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THOROUGHFARES

Solway Ford

HE greets you with a smile from friendly eyes
But never speaks, nor rises from his bed :
Beneath the green night of the sea he lies,
The whole world's waters weighing on his head.

The empty wain made slowly over the sand ;
And he, with hands in pockets, by the side
Was trudging, deep in dream, the while he scanned
With blue, unseeing eyes the far-off tide :
When, stumbling in a hole, with startled neigh
His young horse reared ; and, snatching at the rein,
He slipped : the wheels crushed on him as he lay ;
Then, tilting over him, the lumbering wain
Turned turtle as the plunging beast broke free,
And made for home : and pinioned and half-dead
He lay, and listened to the far-off sea ;
And seemed to hear it surging overhead
Already : though 'twas full an hour or more
Until high-tide, when Solway's shining flood
Should sweep the shallow firth from shore to shore.
He felt a salty tingle in his blood ;

SOLWAY FORD

And seemed to stifle, drowning. Then again,
He knew that he must lie a lingering while
Before the sea might close above his pain,
Although the advancing waves had scarce a mile
To travel, creeping nearer, inch by inch,
With little runs and sallies over the sand.
Cooped in the dark, he felt his body flinch
From each chill wave as it drew nearer hand.
He saw the froth of each oncoming crest,
And felt the tugging of the ebb and flow,
And waves already breaking over his breast,
Though still far-off they murmured, faint and low,
Yet creeping nearer, inch by inch ; and now
He felt the cold drench of the drowning wave,
And the salt cold of death on lips and brow ;
And sank, and sank . . . while still, as in a grave,
In the close dark beneath the crushing cart,
He lay, and listened to the far-off sea.
Wave after wave was knocking at his heart,
And swishing, swishing, swishing ceaselessly
About the wain—cool waves that never reached
His cracking lips, to slake his hell-hot thirst . . .
Shrill in his ear a startled barn-owl screeched . . .
He smelt the smell of oil-cake . . . when there
burst
Through the big barn's wide-open door, the sea—
The whole sea sweeping on him with a roar . . .
He clutched a falling rafter, dizzily . . .
Then sank through drowning deeps, to rise no
more.

SOLWAY FORD

Down, ever down, a hundred years he sank
Through cold green death, ten thousand fathom deep.
His fiery lips deep draughts of cold sea drank
That filled his body with strange icy sleep,
Until he felt no longer that numb ache—
The dead-weight lifted from his legs at last :
And yet, he gazed with wondering eyes awake
Up the green grassy gloom through which he passed :
And saw, far overhead, the keels of ships
Grow small and smaller, dwindling out of sight ;
And watched the bubbles rising from his lips ;
And silver salmon swimming in green night ;
And queer big, yellow skate with scarlet fins
And emerald eyes and fiery-flashing tails :
Enormous eels with purple-spotted skins ;
And mammoth unknown fish with sapphire scales
That bore down on him with red jaws agape,
Like yawning furnaces of blinding heat ;
And when it seemed to him as though escape
From those hell-mouths were hopeless, his bare feet
Touched bottom : and he lay down in his place
Among the dreamless legion of the drowned,
The calm of deeps unsounded on his face,
And calm within his heart ; while all around
Upon the midmost ocean's crystal floor
The naked bodies of dead seamen lay,
Dropped, sheer and clean, from hubbub, brawl and
 roar,
To peace, too deep for any tide to sway.

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SOLWAY FORD

The little waves were lapping round the cart
Already, when they rescued him from death.
Life cannot touch the quiet of his heart
To joy or sorrow, as, with easy breath,
And smiling lips, upon his back he lies,
And never speaks, nor rises from his bed ;
Gazing through those green glooms with happy eyes,
While gold and sapphire fish swim overhead.

A Catch for Singing

SAID the Old Young Man to the Young Old Man :

“ Alack, and well-a-day ! ”

Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young Man :

“ The cherry-tree’s in flourish ! ”

Said the Old Young Man to the Young Old Man :

“ The world is growing grey.”

Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young Man :

“ The cherry-tree’s in flourish ! ”

Said the Old Young Man to the Young Old Man :

“ Both flower and fruit decay.”

Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young Man :

“ The cherry-tree’s in flourish ! ”

Said the Old Young Man to the Young Old Man :

“ Alack, and well-a-day !

The world is growing grey ;

And flower and fruit decay.

Beware Old Man, beware Old Man !

For the end of life is nearing ;

And the grave yawns by the way . . . ”

Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young Man :

“ I’m a trifle hard of hearing,

And can’t catch a word you say . . .

But the cherry-tree’s in flourish ! ”

Geraniums

STUCK in a bottle on the window-sill,
In the cold gaslight burning gaily red
Against the luminous blue of London night,
These flowers are mine ; while somewhere out of sight
In some black-throated alley's stench and heat,
Oblivious of the racket of the street,
A poor old weary woman lies in bed.

Broken with lust and drink, blear-eyed and ill,
Her battered bonnet nodding on her head,
From a dark arch she clutched my sleeve and said :
" I've sold no bunch to-day, nor touched a bite . . .
Son, buy six-penn'orth ; and 'twill mean a bed."

So blazing gaily red
Against the luminous deeps
Of starless London night,
They burn for my delight :
While somewhere, snug in bed,
A worn old woman sleeps.

And yet to-morrow will these blooms be dead
With all their lively beauty ; and to-morrow
May end the light lusts and the heavy sorrow
Of that old body with the nodding head.
The last oath muttered, the last pint drained deep,
She'll sink, as Cleopatra sank, to sleep ;
Nor need to barter blossoms for a bed.

The Whisperers

As beneath the moon I walked,
Dog-at-heel my shadow stalked,
Keeping ghostly company ;
And as we went gallantly
Down the fell-road, dusty-white,
Round us in the windy night
Bracken, rushes, bent and heather
Whispered ceaselessly together :
“ Would he ever journey more,
Ever stride so carelessly,
If he knew what lies before,
And could see what we can see ? ”

As I listened, cold with dread,
Every hair upon my head
Strained to hear them talk of me,
Whispering, whispering ceaselessly :
“ Folly's fool the man must be,
Surely, since, though where he goes
He knows not, his shadow knows ;
And his secret shadow never
Utters warning words, or ever
Seeks to save him from his fate,
Reckless, blindfold, and unknown,
Till death tells him all, too late,
And his shadow walks alone.”

Mabel

WHEN Nigger Dick and Hell-for-Women slouched
Into the taproom of the "Duck and De'il,"
The three Dalmatian pups slunk in at heel
And down among the slushy saw-dust crouched ;
But Mabel would not leave the windy street
For any gaudy tavern's reek and heat—
Not she ! for Mabel was no spotted dog
To crawl among the steaming muddy feet
Beneath a bench and slumber like a log.

And so she set her hoofs, and stayed outside,
Though Hell-for-Women pushed the swing-door wide,
And "Mabel, darling ! Mabel, darling !" cried ;
And Nigger Dick thrust out his head and cursed
Until his tongue burned with so hot a thirst,
He turned and swore that he'd not split his throat,
To save the soul of any giddy goat.

And then they left her, stubborn, wild and white,
Snuffing the wet air of the windy night :
And as she stood beneath a cold blue star
That pierced the narrow strip of midnight sky
Between the sleeping houses black and high,
The glare and glitter of the reeking bar,

MABEL

And all the filth and squalor of the street
Were blotted out

and she was lost between

The beetling crags of some deep, dark ravine
In Andalusian solitudes of stone,
A trembling, young, bewildered nanny-goat
Within the cold blue heart of night alone . . .
Until her ears pricked, tingling to a bleat,
As, far above her, on a naked scar,
The dews of morning dripping from his beard,
Rejoicing in his strength the herd-king reared,
Shaking the darkness from his shaggy coat.

The Vixen

THE vixen made for Deadman's Flow,
Where not a mare but mine could go :
And three hounds only splashed across
The quaking hags of mile-wide moss ;
Only three of the deadbeat pack
Scrambled out by Lone Maid's Slack,
Bolter, Tough, and Ne'er-die-Nell :
But as they broke across the fell
The tongue they gave was good to hear,
Lively music clean and clear,
Such as only light-coats make,
Hot-trod through the girth-deep brake.

The vixen, draggled and nigh spent,
Twisted through the rimy bent
Towards the Christhope Crag. I thought
Every earth stopt . . . winded . . . caught . . .
She's a mask and brush ! When white
A squall of snow swept all from sight ;
And hoodman-blind, Lightfoot and I,
Battled with the roaring sky.

When southerly the snow had swept,
Light broke, as the vixen crept
Slinking up the stony brae.

THE VIXEN

On a jutting scar she lay,
Panting, lathered, while she eyed
The hounds that took the stiff brae-side
With yelping music, mad to kill.

Then vixen, hounds and craggy hill
Were smothered in a blinding swirl :
And when it passed, there stood a girl
Where the vixen late had lain,
Smiling down as I drew rein,
Baffled ; and the hounds, deadbeat,
Fawning at the young girl's feet,
Whimpered, cowed, where her red hair,
Streaming to her ankles bare,
Turned as white among the heather
As the vixen's brush's feather.

Flinching on my flinching mare,
I watched her, gaping and astare,
As she smiled with red lips wide,
White fangs curving either side
Of her lolling tongue . . . My thrapple
Felt fear's fang : I strove, agrapple,
Reeling . . . and again blind snow
Closed like night.

No man may know
How Lightfoot won through Deadman's Flow.
And naught I knew till, in the glow
Of home's wide door, my wife's kind face
Smiled welcome. And for me the chase,

THE VIXEN

The last chase, ended. Though the pack
Through the blizzard struggled back,
Gone were Bolter, Tough and Nell,
Where, the vixen's self can tell !
Long we sought them, high and low,
By Christhope Crag and Deadman's Flow,
By slack and syke and hag : and found
Never bone nor hair of hound.

The Lodging House

WHEN up the fretful, creaking stair,
From floor to floor
I creep
On tiptoe, lest I wake from their first beauty-sleep
The unknown lodgers lying, layer on layer,
In the packed house from roof to basement
Behind each landing's unseen door,
The well-known steps are strangely steep,
And the old stairway seems to soar,
For my amazement
Hung in the air,
Flight on flight
Through pitchy night,
Evermore and evermore.

And when at last I stand outside
My garret-door, I hardly dare
To open it,
Lest when I fling it wide,
With candle lit
And reading in my only chair,
I find myself already there . . .

And so must crawl back down the sheer black pit
Of hell's own stair,
Past lodgers sleeping layer on layer,
To seek a home I know not where.

The Ice

HER day out from the workhouse-ward, she stands,
A grey-haired woman, decent and precise,
With prim black bonnet and neat paisley shawl,
Among the other children by the stall ;
And with grave relish eats a penny ice.

To wizened toothless gums, with quaking hands
She holds it, shivering with delicious cold ;
Nor heeds the jeering laughter of young men,
The happiest, in her innocence, of all :
For, while their insolent youth must soon grow old,
She, who's been old, is now a child again.

Woolgathering

YOUTH that goes woolgathering,
Mooning and stargazing,
Always finding everything
Full of fresh amazing,
Best will meet the moment's need
When the dream brings forth the deed.

He who keeps through all his days
Open eyes of wonder
Is the lord of skiey ways,
And the earth thereunder :
For the heart to do and sing
Comes of youth's woolgathering.

The Tram

HUMMING and creaking, the car down the street
 Lumbered and lurchd through thunderous gloam ;
Bearing us, spent and dumb with the heat,
 From office and counter and factory home :

Sallow-faced clerks, genteel in black ;
 Girls from the laundries, draggled and dank ;
Ruddy-faced labourers, slouching slack ;
 A broken actor, grizzled and lank ;

A mother with querulous babe on her lap ;
 A schoolboy whistling under his breath ;
An old man crouched in a quiet nap ;
 A widow with eyes on the eyes of death ;

A priest ; a sailor with deep-sea gaze ;
 A soldier in scarlet with waxed moustache ;
A drunken trollop in velvet and lace ;
 All silent in that tense dusk . . . when a flash

Of lightning shivered the sultry gloom :
 With shattering brattle the whole sky fell
About us ; and rapt to a dazzling doom
 We glided on in a timeless spell,

THE TRAM

Unscathed through deluge and flying fire,
In a magical chariot of streaming glass,
Cut off from our kind and the world's desire,
Made one by the awe that had come to pass.

On the Embankment

Down on the sunlit ebb, with the wind in her sails, and
free

Of cable and anchor, she swept rejoicing to seek the sea.

And my eyes and my heart swept out with her,
When at my elbow I felt a stir ;
And, glancing down, I saw a lad—
A shambling lad with shifty air,
Weak-chested, stunted and ill-clad,
Who watched her with unseeing stare.

Dull, watery grey eyes he had
Blinking beneath the slouching cap
That hid the low-browed close-cropped head :
And as I turned to him, he said
With hopeless hang-dog air :
“ Just out of gaol three days ago,
And I'll be back before I know ;
For nothing else is left a chap
When once he's been inside . . . and so . . . ”
Then dumb he stood with sightless stare
Set on the sunlit, windy sail of the far-off boat that free
Of cable and anchor still swept on rejoicing to seek the
sea.

My heart is a sunlit, windy sail :
My heart is a hopeless lad in gaol.

The Dancers

'NEATH a thorn as white as snow,
High above the peacock sea,
Hither, thither, to and fro,
Merrily the grey rats go :
To the song of ebb and flow
Moving as to melody.

Over gnarled roots, high and low,
Twisting, frisking fearlessly,
Six young hearts that needs must know,
When the ragged thorn's in blow,
Spring, and Spring's desire, and so
Dance above the dancing sea.

The Wind

To the lean, clean land, to the last cold height,
You shall come with a whickering breath,
From the depths of despair or the depths of delight,
Stript stark to the wind of death.

And whether you're sinless, or whether you've sinned
It's useless to whimper and whine ;
For the lean clean blade of the cut-throat wind
Will slit your weasand and mine.

The Vindictive Staircase ; Or, The Reward of Industry

IN a doomed and empty house in Houndsditch,
All night long I lie awake and listen,
While all night the ghost of Mrs. Murphy
Tiptoes up and down the wheezy staircase,
Sweeling ghostly grease of quaking candles.

Mrs. Murphy, timidest of spectres,
You who were the cheeriest of charers,
With the heart of innocence, and only
Torn between a zest for priests and porter,
Mrs. Murphy of the ample bosom,
Suckler of a score or so of children—
(" Children ? Bless you ! Why, I've buried six, sir.")
Who in forty years wore out three husbands
And one everlasting, shameless bonnet,
Which I've little doubt was confined with you—
Mrs. Murphy, wherefore do you wander,
Sweeling ghostly grease of quaking candles,
Up and down the stairs you scrubbed so sorely,
Scrubbed till they were naked, dank, and aching ?
Now that you are dead, is this their vengeance ?
Recollecting all you made them suffer
With your bristled brush and soapy water,
When you scrubbed them naked, dank, and aching,

THE VINDICTIVE STAIRCASE

Have they power to hold your ghostly footsteps
Chained as to an everlasting treadmill ?

Mrs. Murphy, think you 'twould appease them
If I rose now in my shivering nightshirt,
Rose and told them how you, too, had suffered—
You, their seeming tyrant, but their bonds slave—
Toiling uncomplaining in their service,
Till your knuckles and your knees were knotted
Into writhing fires of red rheumatics,
And how, in the end, 'twas they who killed you ?

Even should their knots still harden to you,
Bow your one and all-enduring bonnet
Till your ear is level with my keyhole,
While I whisper ghostly consolation ;
Know this house is marked out for the spoiler,
Doomed to fall to Hobnails with his pickaxe ;
And its crazy staircase chopped to firewood,
Splintered, bundled, burned to smoke and ashes,
Soon shall perish, scattered to the four winds.
Then, God rest your spirit, Mrs. Murphy !

Yet, who knows ! A staircase . . . Mrs. Murphy,
God forbid that you be doomed to tiptoe
Through eternity, a timid spectre,
Sweeling ghostly grease of quaking candles,
Up and down the spectre of a staircase,
While all night I lay awake and listen
In a damned and ghostly house in Houndsditch !

Ragamuffins

Few folk like the wind's way ;
Fewer folk like mine—
Folk who rise at nine,
Who live to drudge and dine,
Who never see the starry light,
And sleep in the same bed each night
Under the same roof :
When the rascal wind and I
Happen to be gadding by,
Gentlefolk so fat and fine
Beg to hold aloof,
Leaving us to starlit beds, and husks amid
the swine.

Few folk like the wind's song ;
And fewer folk like mine—
Folk who trudge the trodden way,
Who keep the track and never stray,
Who think the sun's for making hay,
Folk who cannot dance or play,
Faultless folk and fine.
Yet, the wind and I are gay,
In our ragamuffin way,
Singing, storm or shine.

The Alarum

STARK to the skin, I crawled a knife-edged blade
Of melting ice above the pit of Hell,
Flame-licked and scorched, yet strangely undismayed ;
Till on my ears a dizzy clamour fell,
And dropt me sheer. . . . and, wakening in my bed.
I saw the sky, beyond the chimneys, red,
And heard the crazy clanging of a bell.

In a Restaurant

HE wears a red rose in his buttonhole,
A city-clerk on Sunday dining out :
And as the music surges over the din,
The heady quavering of the violin
Sings through his blood, and puts old cares to rout,
And tingles, quickening, through his shrunken soul—

Till he forgets his ledgers, and the prim
Black, crabbèd figures, and the qualmy smell
Of ink and musty leather and leadglaze,
As, in eternities of Summer days,
He dives through shivering waves, or rides the
 swell
On rose-red seas of melody aswim.

The Greeting

“ WHAT fettle, mate ? ” to me he said
As he went by
With lifted head
And laughing eye,
Where, black against the dawning red,
The pit-heaps cut the sky :
“ What fettle, mate ? ”

“ What fettle, mate ? ” to him I said,
As he went by
With shrouded head
And darkened eye,
Borne homeward by his marrows, dead
Beneath the noonday sky :
“ What fettle, mate ? ”

Wheels

To safety of the kerb he thrust the crone,
When a shaft took him in the back, and prone
He tumbled heavily, but all unheard
Amid the scurry of wheels that crashed and whirled
About his senseless head—his helmet crushed
Like crumpled paper by a car that rushed
Upon him unaware. And as he lay
He heard again the wheels he'd heard all day
About him on point duty. . . . only now
Each red-hot wheel ran searing over his brow—
A sizzling star with hub and spokes and tyre
One monstrous Catherine-wheel of sparking fire
Whirring down windy tunnels of the night. . . .
That Catherine-wheel, somehow it will not light—
Fixed to the broken paling ; and the pin
Pricks the boy's finger as he jabs it in :
He sucks the salty blood—the spiteful thing
Fires, whizzing, sputtering sparks : he feels them sting
His wincing cheek ; and, on the damp night-air,
The stench of burnt saltpetre and singed hair. . . .
While still he lies and listens without fear
To the loud traffic rumbling in his ear—
Wheels rumbling in his ear, and through his brain

WHEELS

For evermore, a never-ending train
Of scarlet postal-vans that whirl one red
Perpetual hot procession through his head—
His head that's just a clanking, clattering mill
Of grinding wheels. . . . And down an endless hill
After his hoop he runs, a little lad,
Barefooted 'neath the stars, in nightshirt clad—
And stumbles into bed, the stars all gone,
Though in his head the hoop keeps running on,
And on and on : his head grown big and wide
Holds all the windy night and stars inside. . . .
And still within a hair's breadth of his ear
The crunch and gride of wheels rings sharp and
clear,
Huge lumbering wagons, crusted ankle-deep
With country marl, their drivers half-asleep
Against green toppling mounds of cabbages
Still crisp with dewy airs, or stacks of cheese
Smelling of Arcady, till all the sky
In clouds of cheese and cabbages rolls by—
Great golden cheeses wheeling through the night,
And giant cabbages of emerald light
That tumble after, scattering crystal drops. . . .
While in his ear the grinding never stops—
Wheels grinding asphalt. . . . then a high-piled wain
Of mignonette in boxes. . . . and again,
A baby at his father's cottage-door,
He toddles, treading on his pinafore,
And tumbles headlong in a bed of bloom,
Half-smothered in the deep, sweet honeyed gloom

WHEELS

Of crushed, wet blossom, and the hum of bees—
Big bumble-bees that buzz through flowery trees—
Grows furious. . . . changing to a roar of wheels
And honk of hooting horns : and now he feels
That all the cars in London filled with light
Are bearing down upon him through the night,
As out of hall and theatre there pour
White-shouldered women, ever more and more,
Bright-eyed, with flashing teeth, borne in a throng
Of purring, glittering cars, ten thousand strong ;
Each drowsy dame, and eager chattering lass
Laughing unheard within her box of glass. . . .
And then great darkness, and a clanging bell—
Clanging beneath the hollow dome of hell
Aglow like burnished copper ; and a roar
Of wheels and wheels and wheels for evermore,
As engine after engine crashes by
With clank and rattle under that red sky,
Dropping a trail of burning coals behind,
That scorch his eyeballs till he lies half-blind,
Smouldering to cinder in a vasty night
Of wheeling worlds and stars in whirring flight,
And suns that blaze in thunderous fury on
For ever and for ever, yet are gone
Ere he can gasp to see them. . . . head to heels
Slung round a monstrous red-hot hub, that wheels
Across infinity, with spokes of fire
That dwindle slowly till the shrinking tyre
Is clamped like aching ice about his head. . . .

.

WHEELS

He smells clean acid smells : and safe in bed
He wakens in a lime-washed ward, to hear
Somebody moaning almost in his ear,
And knows that it's himself that moans : and then,
Battling his way back to the world of men,
He sees, with leaden eyelids opening wide,
His young wife gravely knitting by his side.

Prometheus

ALL day beneath the bleak, indifferent skies,
Broken and blind, a shivering bag of bones,
He trudges over icy paving-stones,
And "Matches ! Matches ! Matches ! Matches !" cries.

And now beneath the dismal, dripping night,
And shadowed by a deeper night, he stands :
And yet he holds within his palsied hands
Quick fire enough to set his world alight.

Night

SUDDENLY kindling the skylight's pitchy square,
The eyes of a cat, sinister, glassy and green,
Caught by a trick of the light in a senseless stare . . .
And the powers of the older night, abhorrent, obscene,
Each from his den of darkness and loathly lair,
Slink to my bedside, and gibber and mow, and fill
My heart with the Fear of the Fen and the Dread of the
Hill
And the Terror that stalks by night through the Wood
of Doom.

And things that are headless and nameless throng the
room :
The cold webbed fingers of witches are in my hair :
The clammy lips of the warlock are clenched to mine :
The Eel of the bottomless pit of Deadman's Bog
Slithers an icy spiral about my spine :
A corpse-clutch freezes my midriff, the foul reek of
Fog . . .

When my hand is licked by the warm wet tongue of my
dog ;
The eyes blink out ; and Horror slinks back to her
den ;
And I breathe again.

On Hampstead Heath

AGAINST the green flame of the hawthorn-tree
His scarlet tunic burns ;
And livelier than the green sap's mantling glee
The Spring fire tingles through him headily,
As quivering he turns

And stammers out the old amazing tale
Of youth and April weather :
While she, with half-breathed jests that, sobbing, fail,
Sits tight-lipped, quaking, eager-eyed and pale,
Beneath her purple feather.

A Vision in a Tea-Shop

His hair lit up the tea-shop like a fire,
The naked flame of youth made manifest—
Young hunger's unappeasable desire
Devouring cakes and cream with eager zest :

While, cheek by jowl, an old man, bald and blind
And peaked and withered as a waning moon,
With toothless, mumbling gums, and wandering mind,
Supped barley-water from a tremulous spoon.

I turned a moment ; and the man was gone :
And as I looked upon the red-haired boy,
About him in a blinding glory shone
The sons of morning singing together for joy.

Lines

Addressed to the Spectre of an Elderly Gentleman, recently demised, Whom the Author had once observed performing a Benevolent Office in the Vicinity of Holborn, W.C.

I SAW you, seated on a horse's head,
While the blaspheming carter cut the traces,
Obese, white-waistcoated, and newly fed,
Through bland, indifferent monocle surveying
The gaping circle of indifferent faces.

And now the news has come that you are dead,
I see you, while they cut the tangled traces,
On your own hearse's fallen horse's head,
Through bland, indifferent monocle surveying
The unseeing circle of funereal faces.

The Dreadnought

BREASTING the tide of the traffic, the "Dreadnought"
comes,
Beribboned and gay, the first of the holiday brakes,
Brimful of broken old women, a parish's mothers,
Bearing them out for the day from grey alleys and
slums—
A day in the forest of Epping grown green for their
sakes.

Listless and stolid they crouch, everlastingly tired,
Mere bundles of patience outworn, half-deaf and half-
blind,
Save only one apple-cheeked grannie, more brisk than
the others,
Who, remembering, with youth in her eyes and the old
dreams desired,
Sits kissing her hand to the drivers who follow behind.

Sight

By the lamplit stall I loitered, feasting my eyes
On colours ripe and rich for the heart's desire—
Tomatoes, redder than Krakatoa's fire,
Oranges like old sunsets over Tyre,
And apples golden-green as the glades of Paradise.

And as I lingered, lost in divine delight,
My heart thanked God for the goodly gift of sight
And all youth's lively senses keen and quick . . .
When suddenly, behind me in the night,
I heard the tapping of a blind man's stick.

The Gorse

IN dream, again within the clean, cold hell
Of glazed and aching silence he was trapped ;
And, closing in, the blank walls of his cell
Crushed stifling on him . . . when the bracken snapped,
Caught in his clutching fingers ; and he lay
Awake upon his back among the fern,
With free eyes travelling the wide blue day,
Unhindered, unremembering ; while a burn
Tinkled and gurgled somewhere out of sight,
Unheard of him ; till suddenly aware
Of its cold music, shivering in the light,
He raised himself, and with far-ranging stare
Looked all about him : and, with dazed eyes wide
Saw, still as in a numb, unreal dream,
Black figures scouring a far hill-side,
With now and then a sunlit rifle's gleam ;
And knew the hunt was hot upon his track :
Yet hardly seemed to mind, somehow, just then . . .
But kept on wondering why they looked so black
On that hot hillside, all those little men
Who scurried round like beetles—twelve, all told . . .
He counted them twice over ; and began

THE GORSE

A third time reckoning them, but could not hold
His starved wits to the business, while they ran
So brokenly, and always stuck at "five" . . .
And "One, two, three, four, five," a dozen times
He muttered . . . "Can you catch a fish alive?"
Sang mocking echoes of old nursery rhymes
Through the strained, tingling hollow of his head.
And now, almost remembering, he was stirred
To pity them ; and wondered if they'd fed
Since he had, or if, ever since they'd heard
Two nights ago the sudden signal-gun
That raised alarm of his escape, they too,
Had fasted in the wilderness, and run
With nothing but the thirsty wind to chew,
And nothing in their bellies but a fill
Of cold peat-water, till their heads were light . . .

The crackling of a rifle on the hill
Rang in his ears : and stung to headlong flight,
He started to his feet ; and through the brake
He plunged in panic, heedless of the sun
That burned his cropped head to a red-hot ache
Still racked with crackling echoes of the gun.

Then suddenly the sun-enkindled fire
Of gorse upon the moor-top caught his eye :
And that gold glow held all his heart's desire,
As, like a witless, flame-bewildered fly,
He blundered towards the league-wide yellow blaze,
And tumbled headlong on the spikes of bloom ;

THE GORSE

And rising, bruised and bleeding and adaze,
Struggled through clutching spines: the dense, sweet
fume

Of nutty, acrid scent like poison stealing
Through his hot blood: the bristling yellow glare
Spiking his eyes with fire, till he went reeling,
Stifed and blinded, on—and did not care
Though he were taken—wandering round and round,
“Jerusalem the Golden” quavering shrill,
Changing his tune to “Tommy Tiddler’s Ground”:
Till, just a lost child on that dazzling hill,
Bewildered in a glittering golden maze
Of stinging scented fire, he dropped, quite done,
A shrivelling wisp within a world ablaze
Beneath a blinding sky, one blaze of sun.

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